

Unequal Englishes as a Sociolinguistics of Globalization

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Introduction

The sociolinguistics of globalization refers mainly to an understanding of and engagement with the politics and cultural dynamics of globalization through the lens of the social dimensions of language. In the words of Blommaert (2010), “globalization is a sociolinguistic subject matter, and language is something intrinsically connected to processes to globalization” (p. 2). By tracking how people use language (here broadly covering interpersonal/micro uses of language and institutional/state/macro deployments of language), one is able to describe and unpack the processes and discourses of globalization. One key assumption in this area is that language and globalization are inextricably linked, and that one misses important aspects of the latter if language is ignored in the analysis. On the other hand, because the politics of language today cannot be divorced from the politics of globalization, anyone interested in how people use language to communicate with other groups of speakers across various cultural, socioeconomic and political borders cannot afford to avoid engaging with the contested politics of globalization.

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This paper argues that one (but certainly not the only) way to understand globalization is through the lens of *Unequal Englishes*, a view of 'global' English not only as a deeply localized language, with various varieties formed through cultural mediation and language contact but, more importantly, a view of such English language varieties as unequally valued and distributed. It is centered around the politics of Englishes or the pluralization of English. Tracing the development of 'global' English demands looking at the twin processes of the spread and localization of English due to globalization and colonization. In short, despite the promise of social mobility, job employment and symbolic power, access to privileged values and practices associated with English remains hugely available only to small groups of speakers around the world, and the infrastructures and practices of globalization and colonization can help us understand why this is so. Thus, "[s]ociolinguistically, the world has not become a village" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 1).

For at least four decades now, we have celebrated the pluralization of English through the paradigms of World Englishes (WE) (Kachru, 1988; Bhatt, 2001), English as an International Language (EIL) (McKay, 2004; Modiano, 2001) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2008), but inequalities of Englishes remain a key feature of the spread and localization of the language. Unequal Englishes help structure our relationships with other people, as well as frame language policy-making around the world. This is especially important now in the midst of vigorous campaigns to make English a medium of instruction around the world (Macaro et al., 2018; Phillipson, 2017) without due consideration of local language and cultural ecologies, thus resulting in the uneven spread of access to quality of English language education. Educational systems may produce 'proficient' students but this simply means proficiencies appropriate to particular jobs. For example, Filipino graduates speak different Englishes generated through a nexus of socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions, with some Englishes limiting the speakers' choices of jobs or life chances in the (global) market (Tupas & Salonga, 2016; Lorente, 2018). Thus, the Englishes that people produce are part and parcel of inequalities of globalization where the promise of unfettered mobility and good life for all is a myth (Kubota, 2011; Phillipson, 2017).

The Faces of English

The colonial face

According to prominent sociolinguist Braj Kachru (1988), English has two faces—the face of the past (the colonial) and the face of the present (the postcolonial). The colonial face, of course, is associated with the idea of English as an imperialist language (Phillipson, 1992). The language was transplanted in different parts of the world through the mechanisms of British and American imperialism and imposed upon deeply multilingual cultural ecologies, for example, through the institutionalization of the language as the sole medium of instruction and by making it the de facto official language of business and governance. This has led to both the establishment of English as the most desirable and highly valued language, as well as the marginalization of practically all local languages spoken by colonized people. Pedagogically, the imposition of English resulted in radical transformations of educational systems not only through the use of a new and foreign medium of instruction, but also through the introduction—and, more importantly, the legitimization—of new and foreign content. Scholars refer to this as cultural imperialism (Holliday, 2006; Phillipson, 1996) because foreign values and cultural practices are imposed on students whose cultural norms and practices differ from what they are taught in school. Moreover, new ways and norms of teaching and learning were introduced, and this would thus also essentially mean the devaluation of the local multilingual repertoires of pupils, as well as the use of language standards used and preferred by ‘native speakers’ of English. Thus, according to Kachru (1988) and other scholars (Bhatt, 2001), this colonial face of English is practically the face of the colonizers: foreign, monolingual, and unwelcoming of differences and variation in the way the language was spoken.

The postcolonial face

The other face of English, in turn, is the postcolonial face. It is a plural, local, and subversive face. It begins with the argument that English is and has been

“growing roots in a great many countries and communities around the world, being appropriated by local speakers, and in that process it is diversifying and developing new dialects” (Schneider, 2003, p. 233). However, such an argument is embedded politically in postcolonial theorizing which claims (and rightly so) that while colonial subjection was violent (both physically and symbolically), it was never complete. The colonized found different creative ways of resisting colonialism, one of which was ‘destroying’ the English language—or essentially, “altering and manipulating the structure and functions of English in its new ecology” (Bhatt, 2001, p. 534). This means using it in ways that reflect the cultural realities of local life and subverting the colonial standards of English and norms of language use in order to allow voices of the colonized to come through their own use of the language. Here, we see an understanding of globalization not simply as a facilitator of English language spread and carrier of foreign ‘imperialist’ values and knowledge but also as an enabler of resistive possibilities for the colonized. Key to this understanding is cultural mediation: the spread of English *did* happen through globalization and imperialism, but local cultures intervened to make their mark on the English language.

Thus, it is not enough to say that the globalization of English resulted in its spread across all parts of the world, and this does not refer only to countries formerly governed directly by British and American rulers but to practically all countries in which English has ‘settled’ and is now part of local linguistic ecologies. Some countries may not have been directly colonized but the expanded influence of English has seen the introduction and legitimization of Anglo-American norms of communication and, in fact, of thinking and doing, which went along with the spread of the language (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Holliday, 2006). Cultural intervention in English language use, in other words, is a core feature of the globalization of English, which consequently would mean both the spread *and* the localization of English. Sociolinguistically speaking, globalization is synonymous with localization: as soon as people learn and use what is referred to as ‘global’ or globalized English, localization begins. English is both local and global, and this has been evidenced by substantive work in all levels of English language use, from its phonology and syntax to its rhetorical

and ideological aspects—essentially demonstrating that the forms, meanings, functions and ideologies of English are culturally diverse and dynamically changing (McKay, 2004; Schneider, 2003; Jenkins, 2000).

This whole idea of the plurality of English as a result of the combined phenomena of globalization and localization, framed politically as forms of subversion or creative/agentive use of language, has exposed myths or destroyed sacred cows in English language teaching and learning. It has reconfigured the conversations not only in English language teaching and learning but also in the broader fields of applied linguistics and language acquisition studies. Native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), the belief in the intrinsic superiority of the ‘native speaker’ in the teaching, learning and use of English, has provided scholars and practitioners a critical vocabulary that exposes unjust and destructive discourses and practices which govern and saturate the teaching, learning, development and spread of the English language. Cultural appropriateness of English language teaching, learning and use means that the use of a singular set of norms of English—especially one that is based on ‘native speaker’ norms, as well as the deployment of monolingual (in English) pedagogies, especially because they devalue or promote hatred towards the local languages or mother tongues—are no longer deemed acceptable. In fact, they have been proven to be pedagogically unsound (McKay, 2004; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996). According to Schneider (2003), “[c]ompetence in a language is tied to its constant use” (p. 238), thus it is no longer tenable to assume that “only native speakers fully command a language and have proper intuitions on its structural properties”. Consequently, the postcolonial face of English or, more appropriately perhaps, the acknowledgment and legitimization of the postcolonial face of English, has resulted in the transformation of pedagogies of English classroom approaches and practices which are culturally sensitive and liberating, and respectful of linguistic diversity.

Nevertheless, while the postcolonial face of English has indeed exposed many myths (Phillipson, 1992) and sacred cows (Kachru, 1988) in teaching and learning, it has also constructed quite a limiting lens through which the reality

of such myths and sacred cows as continuously shaping classroom practices and educational policies today is concealed. The postcolonial face of English has been celebrated to the point that such a celebration has become unbridled or unchecked, unfortunately glossing over the continuing role of English in the perpetuation of colonially-induced inequalities in the world today (Kubota, 2015; Tupas, 2015). The following realities about the dominance of English are an indication that the postcolonial face of English does not describe accurately the multifaceted functions of the language today:

- The continuing debate on the wisdom of English as medium of instruction
- The continuing privileging of ‘native speaker’ norms
- The continuing privileging of the ‘native speaker’ as the ideal speaker and teacher of English
- The continuing silencing of local languages in English language classrooms
- The continuing imposition of monolingual language teaching ‘methods’

Thus, while keeping the critical dimensions of the postcolonial face of English—one that subverts linguistic and cultural imperialism through the recuperation of the ever-present agentive or resistive possibilities of the use of English among ‘non-native’ speakers of the language (Canagarajah, 1999; Modiano, 2001)—it is imperative that we reconfigure the way we appraise the role of English in the world today, “a world that *still* values native speakers as the norm providers and the natural choice in language teacher selection” (Llurda, 2009, p. 119, italics supplied). Through a wider lens, Kubota (2015) states that “there are problems behind the celebration of multiplicities with little attention paid to unequal relations of power” (p. 35). Globalization has not only resulted in both the spread and the localization of English but, more centrally, the processes of language spread and localization have generated old and new forms of inequality in which English is implicated but which, of course,

have non-linguistic dimensions as well. The colonial and the postcolonial faces of English simultaneously define the dominant contours of the language today, thus leading to a sociolinguistic understanding of globalization as the production of globally-shaped but locally-practiced *Unequal Englishes*.

Unequal Englishes

The notion of *Unequal Englishes* refers to “the unequal ways and situations in which Englishes are arranged, configured, and contested” (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015, p. 3; see also Tupas, 2015; Tupas & Salonga, 2016; Salonga, 2015). Invoking inequalities of English assumes that the language is plural and dynamically changing, except that such plurality and change impact the lives of speakers unequally. It addresses what Kubota claims is lacking in the study of the politics of Englishes today: “critical attention to the inequalities that exist amongst Englishes, English users, and languages including English” (p. 35). The role of globalization is crucial here not only because it continues to facilitate the construction of infrastructures of power and ideology (for example, textbook industries, testing institutions and job placement agencies) through which standard language ideologies and native-speakerism are perpetuated and propagated, but also because it constructs an economic world order where the promise of cultural mobility and socioeconomic upliftment has become unattainable to many. Thus, the promise of prosperity through English has turned some learners and users of the language into ‘servants of globalization’ (Parreñas, 2001) or ‘workers of the world’ (Lorente, 2018). They can indeed ‘speak’ English but only to the extent that their levels of proficiency are just enough for particular kinds of jobs in the local and global markets. Whereas the role of English as a social stratifier has been put forward in articulate ways since at least the 1960s during which anti-colonial agendas emerged as the rallying calls of local populations, we have here a view of Englishes—plural—as instruments of social stratification, with real “effects” (Pennycook, 1994/2017, p. ix) on people’s lives.

What we see here is not a plea to a simple return to the centrality of the politics of English as the core business of the study of English and globalization

but, more crucially, to a critical politics of the pluralization of English at the center of which is the unequally distributed symbolic and material consequences of such pluralization. We speak different Englishes but our Englishes do not equally give us access to the promised goods and benefits of learning English. In short, *Unequal Englishes* is the study of the globalization—thus pluralization and localization—of Englishes, but through the lens of how these Englishes are, as mentioned earlier, arranged, configured, and contested in local contexts of English language use.

“It is a pity,” argue Pennycook, Kubota and Morgan (2017), “that so much work has focused on putative varieties of English from a world Englishes perspective, when what we really need to address are the questions of unequal Englishes” (p. xiv). Of course, the notion of *Unequal Englishes* is not new. Much has been written about the injustices caused by native-speakerist attitudes and ideologies, as well as the promotion of a singular Standard English norm (Holliday, 2006; Canagarajah, 1999). However, what *Unequal Englishes* does is not only to consolidate all related work in this regard, but to train a sharper focus on the politics of pluralization of English and its differentiated effects on individual users, as well as on groups of users, of the language, leading Siqueira (2018) to claim that it is a “potential new field of studies related to the global spread of English, highlighting, among other aspects, the importance of understanding, analysing, and transforming the inequalities inherent in such a process” (p. 228). Its primary focus is to investigate how the reality of the plurality of English is implicated in the globally-shaped but locally-practiced everyday lives of speakers. The exercise of power through English, according to Park and Wee (2013), “is embedded into the material and symbolic relations on the local level” (p. 5). Within the framework of *Unequal Englishes*, such exercise of power is through differential access to Englishes.

In the following paragraphs, two examples of how unequal Englishes operate within specific sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts will be discussed. The first example is a discussion of how unequal Englishes frame relationships and life chances among young Filipinos who work—or aspire to work—in call centers in the Philippines. The second example draws insights

from classroom interaction in a local secondary school in Singapore where two main varieties of English and the ideologies that sustain them frame teacher and students' attitudes towards these varieties.

Tupas and Salonga (2016) investigate the stratifying role of pluralized English in call centers in the Philippines. What emerges from interviews with call center agents is a complex picture of how the agents' English is positioned as a privileged form or variety of English in relation to the greater number of Filipinos who applied for a job at call centers but who did not make it because their 'Philippine Englishes' (see also Gonzales, 2017; Martin, 2014) fall off the edges of what is referred to as 'standard English' or 'acceptable English'. Such Philippine Englishes are undoubtedly class-shaped because their speakers graduated from schools with generally low quality of educational provision or came from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, Filipino call center agents are also positioned marginally as non-American or 'non-native' speakers of English, and this could be observed in the way they are trained to 'neutralize' their English, or in the way customers mistake the agents' variety of English for incompetence or untrustworthiness. The rise of offshore call centers is a global phenomenon, a massive restructuring business design which aims to source out cheap labor from countries such as India and the Philippines for non-core jobs of companies sited in more developed capitalist countries such as the United States. The offshore business industry has provided English-dependent jobs for a number of people but access to such jobs in specific national contexts has not in any substantial way altered the hierarchizing role of English in these places. In fact, it has perpetuated it in the sense that only a small group of young Filipino speakers of English has benefited from this supposedly 'global' enterprise. Meanwhile, the ideology of English as desirable for socioeconomic mobility continues to pervade current justifications for the dominant use of English in the schools, in fact with many arguing that it should be introduced in the educational system at the earliest possible time. What is left out in the equation is the idea that the politics of pluralization of English implicates young people's social class backgrounds, and even their ethnolinguistic affiliations. What is crucial in one's entry into

the call center industry is not simply one's ability to speak in English but, more importantly, one's variety of English which he or she has learned from school and home (see also Salonga, 2015). Unequal Englishes operate not only in terms of how Philippine English and 'standard English' are unequally valued, but also in terms of how Filipinos' Englishes are themselves also treated unequally. Filipinos' life chances are in this sense framed not simply according to whether they speak English or not, but whether their kind of English is valued in market places such as the call center.

The second example looks at a particular excerpt of a classroom interaction in a local Singapore secondary school. It maps out another concrete realization of *Unequal Englishes* in the classroom where the notion of Standard English as associated with correctness and credibility is subtly challenged by a student's question. The teacher, perhaps because he is unable to capture the nuances of the question in relation to the issue of *Unequal Englishes*, avoids confronting it directly. It is a missed opportunity offered by a student to deconstruct essentialized perceptions of Standard English and those who speak it, which in turn devalue and even mock those who speak non-standard varieties. But first a brief note on the data extract.

It comes from a much larger set of data drawn from research on cross-cultural facilitation in English language secondary classrooms in Singapore. The main aim of the research was to find out what teachers do to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and dialogue as stipulated in the English language curriculum. Classroom observations and recordings were conducted in several classrooms in three schools, while teachers were interviewed after lessons and during three rounds of Focus Group Discussions. In the process, some teachers drew on Singapore's rich array of English language varieties as part of their cultural and pedagogical resources in the classroom. In Singapore, local English is comprised of two varieties, Standard Singapore English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) (Pakir, 1991; Alsagoff, 2010; Chua, 2015). This is not the place to discuss the debates concerning these varieties (see Bokhorst-Heng, 2005), but suffice it to say that CSE is generally accepted as a cultural identifier for Singaporeans but it is also generally deemed unacceptable in the classroom

(Tupas, 2016). Linguistically, CSE—or Singlish—is a legitimate variety since it has its own grammar and lexicon (Bao, 2015) and is used as the country’s lingua franca in informal contexts (Vaish & Roslan, 2011). A ‘competent’ Singaporean English language speaker, in other words, is not just simply one who speaks ‘standard’ English, but someone who is able to make appropriate switches between SSE and CSE (Pakir, 1991; Alsagoff, 2010; Chua, 2015).

The following brief exchange between Teacher Andy (not a real name) and a student happens in the context of the first of a series of six sessions on news writing in a Secondary 2 class. This particular session (as well as the fifth one) is a one-hour session, while the rest are 30-minute sessions, thus totaling four hours spent on teaching news writing. In this session, Andy tackles the fundamental characteristics of a good news report, asking students what their views are regarding what they think makes a report “credible”. Here, Andy flashes onscreen an image of an article, “Fake radio ‘war’ stirs terror through U.S.”, and explains how people mistook a story for an accurate news report. Unequal Englishes in this exchange surface through the student’s question about the role of good English in communicating credible information, thus leading to a possible undermining of the incorrect but dominant perception that good English indexes credible news and credible people.

Andy: You might not know this story but it happened a long long time ago whereby it was a radio. That time they didn’t have TV. It’s in the US, people listened to the news on the radio. What happened was this is that people heard a news report but actually the news report was a story. The person was just giving a night time story. He was saying about war of the worlds. Have you watched the movie before? Basically he’s saying that there is an alien invasion. Coming down to earth and then he made up a story. But he presented it like a news reporter. He say his story on the news, everyone heard it, what happened? Created a state of panic, everyone really thought that it was real. That the world was getting invaded and then they all started panicking because they had someone they thought was a reliable source. They thought

that someone was giving details, accurate details. They panic and thought it was real.

Student: So that radio guy must be very good at English.

Andy: Well, I guess so at that time because they didn't have the face and all that. [They just heard the noise.]

Student: [He made it seem so real.]

Andy: Yes he did. So don't believe everything that you read on the internet just because there is a picture and a quote next to it.

Students talking at the same time.

Andy: Ok, moving on.

In this exchange, Andy aims to impress upon the students the need to be discerning when listening to or reading news reports. In fact, in this session and the rest of the sessions that come after, Andy consistently—and rightly so—reminds the students that accuracy of information is crucial in a credible news report. However, in the above exchange, a student presents a potentially profound point about the tricky relationship between good English and credible communication. He is implying that the reporter must have delivered the “news” in really good English such that he made everyone believe in the accuracy of the news. I argue here that the student operates within a dominant ideological frame which links good or ‘standard’ English with being credible and trustworthy, but instead of acquiescing to this belief, the student attempts to question it by asking how it is possible for someone with apparently very good English to be the bearer of fake news. Note that the class does not have access to the actual recording of the radio news reporting; the student is possibly merely postulating the possibility that the ability to speak and write in very good English does not automatically mean being credible. When Andy tries to respond, the student’s remark—‘He made it seem so real’ (note again that the students do not have the benefit of listening to the actual radio report recording)—is spontaneous and overlaps with Andy’s last sentence, thus somehow showing us that the student does know the point he is trying to put across.

This particular episode of teaching and learning in the classroom about credible reporting has the potential of overturning the subtle presence of ideologies which perpetuate inequalities of Englishes in the classroom. This potential is especially so in this context because the topic is about the use of credible language in news-report writing. There is considerable research that shows how—more than other factors like gender or country-of-origin—‘standard’ accents, perceptions of good English and privileged varieties of English are strongly correlated with people and products deemed *credible* (Lalwani, Lwin, M., & Li, 2005; Bishop, Coupland, N., & Garrett, 2005; Braine, 1999). The symbolic domination of ‘good’ English (Heller, 1997) in this particular session and in the rest of the sessions is apparent in terms of the unexamined assumption of good English as credible communication. As I pointed out in the observation notes concerning the exchange above: “so what makes it [the fake radio report] unreliable?? (Excellent student! Why didn’t the teacher explore this?)”. Indeed, Andy does not see himself pursuing the question about objective and credible report writing through the lens of English language use and, instead, chooses to provide a rather broad statement about not treating all information on the internet as if it is all correct and credible. Instead, he disengages from the student’s question by telling the class, “Ok, moving on ...” and redirects the discussion towards other matters.

Conclusion

What this paper has attempted to show—especially through the examples above—is that English has not merely become ‘Englishes’. It has become ‘unequal Englishes’. The pluralization of English is not merely a phenomenon of linguistic or structural transformation, not just a political practice of resistance or subversion but, more broadly, also a mechanism in the facilitation of globally-shaped local relations of power between groups of speakers. Speakers mobilize the practices and ideologies of unequal Englishes as they sustain and/or transform, unequal social relationships such as the relationships between teachers and pupils, or Filipino call center agents and other young Filipinos who aspire to but are unable to join the call center industry largely because of

their unacceptable accents. The hiring of Filipino call centers based on one's English or ability to navigate between different 'standard' Englishes, or the deployment of standard English ideologies in the classroom, is constitutive of the politics of pluralization of English which needs to be unpacked for its role in perpetuating (and yes, also transforming) linguistic and social inequalities. English language varieties and standard English language ideologies are not disconnected from larger issues of globalization and its impact on people's lives. Continuing concerns around pluralization of English are concerns about profitability, marketability, global competitiveness, quality of education, to name a few market-driven 'global' issues.

We should continue to push towards an agenda of a pluralized English, especially in the context of education where attitudes towards it are still generally negative. They do help demolish destructive pedagogies and classroom practices, especially those concerning the devaluing of cultural and linguistic diversity as resource for teaching and learning. However, it is not yet time to be complacent. To paraphrase Blommaert again, globalization has not made us a global village. Unequal Englishes remind us that we live in different communities, interacting with each other but some more privileged than others in terms of people's life chances and access to the world's prized symbolic and material goods.

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